DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 165 HE 026 771

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TITLE The Department Chair: New Roles, Responsibilities and Challenges. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. School of Education and Human Development.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-HE-93-1
PUB DATE Oct 93
CONTRACT RR930200
NOTE 4p.; For the full length report, see HE 026 770.
AVAILABLE FROM ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, The George Washington University, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183 ($1).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Characteristics; Administrator Responsibility; *Administrator Role; *College Administration; *Department Heads; Faculty Evaluation; Higher Education; Institutional Characteristics; *Leadership; Political Power; Professional Development; Teacher Administrator Relationship
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest explores the changing role of the academic department chair in the areas of leadership, influence, and faculty development. The paper uses research insights to explore the situation of an academic chair who is squeezed between the demands of upper administration and the expectations of faculty, staff, and students. Studies of the roles and responsibilities of chairs consistently show that the chair's role is ambiguous, unclear in authority, and difficult to classify as faculty or administrator. The tradition of faculty ownership dictates that chair leadership must emphasize empowering activities. The most effective use of political influence and power understands the political forces and processes of the institution and maneuvers groups and coalitions to achieve the autonomy and control necessary to a strong department. Faculty evaluation provides the chair with a powerful opportunity for developing quality. In addition, the chair must recognize how institutional type, history, and culture, model of governance, and discipline can influence what is expected. In the coming years chairs will need a program of professional development on many fronts to acquire the skills to address the complex challenges they will face. (Contains 9 references.) (JB)

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October 1993
EDO-HE-93-1

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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The academic department is the base unit of universities and colleges, "the central building block...of the American university" (Trow 1977). While departments fragment and divide the faculty of an institution of higher education, they also provide a useful structure for the day-to-day activities that shape faculty members' attitudes, behaviors, and performances.

The metaphor of a block of wood held in a vise for shaping seems appropriate to describe the situation of an academic chair. The chair is squeezed between the demands of upper administration and institutional expectations on the one side and the expectations of faculty, staff, and students on the other, with both attempting to influence and shape the chair. The chair is caught in the middle, required to provide the most sophisticated leadership and statesmanship to avoid being crushed by these two opposing forces.

The purpose of *The Department Chair* is to glean from the research insights about the chairs or heads of academic departments who are caught in the middle. The literature documents that chairs of academic departments in the 1990s will be expected to perform in an increasingly complex, diverse, and changing environment, with ever-increasing expectations from the institution and the faculty. The following issues are most often raised as needing attention: (1) roles and responsibilities of chairs, (2) the chair as leader, (3) the political influences on the chair and the use of power, (4) the chair's responsibility for evaluation and development of faculty, (5) the influence of institutional type and specific discipline on the chair, and (6) challenges facing chairs in the 1990s and beyond.

What Are the Roles and Responsibilities of Chairs?

Numerous studies have been conducted on the tasks, activities, roles, and responsibilities of departmental chairs, but despite researchers' ability to identify tasks and job-related duties, the chair's role continues to be ambiguous, unclear in terms of authority, and unable to be classified as faculty or administrator--all of which contribute to a high level of stress. Thus, the chair must learn to cope readily with the demands of being in the middle, with responsibilities to both faculty and administration.

What Are the Requirements for Leadership?

Institutions of higher education differ from many organizations, requiring leadership to be a more shared phenomenon than in most profit-focused enterprises. The concept of faculty ownership is basic to academic institutions; thus, departmental leadership requires greater emphasis on empowering activities than in many other types of organizations. The chair, in concert with faculty, must develop a vision beyond the immediate tasks and employ strategies that develop the faculty's commitment to that vision. While chairs have opportunities to exercise leadership in a number of different settings, including faculty meetings, offices and laboratories, the total institution, and the disciplinary community, the requirements of leadership vary depending on the department's stage of development, the specific management function, the academic discipline, and the chair's own style of leadership. The chair must ensure that an effective data base exists for informed decision making, try to understand the use and dynamics of the politics of the institution, use faculty members' strengths to develop quality, and create an environment where faculty can strengthen their own professional status through the achievement of a shared vision.

How Can the Chair Effectively Use Political Influence and Power?

A number of internal and external constituencies--faculty, upper-level administration, the institution's governing body, legislative bodies, accrediting bodies, other external agencies and groups--influence decision making in the department. Institutions of higher education are, to a large extent, open political systems. Chairs draw upon two primary sources of power: the authority outlined in formal job descriptions and the informal influence of personal characteristics, expertise, and ability to capitalize on opportunity. Chairs must understand the political forces and processes of the institution and must skillfully maneuver groups and coalitions to achieve the autonomy and control necessary to develop a strong department. Chairs must skillfully use certain strategies (called push, pull, persuasion, preventative, and preparatory strategies in the literature) and tactics (impression management, agenda setting, networking, and negotiation) to manage an effective department.

What Is the Chair's Role in Faculty Evaluation and Development?

The quality of the program of an academic department is largely determined by the quality and performance of the faculty. Evaluation, the process of making judgments about performance, is one of the most powerful opportunities for developing quality available to a chair.

For a chair to evaluate faculty effectively, the reasons for the evaluation and the techniques to be employed must be clear to the chair, the dean, and the faculty. Procedures to evaluate faculty can provide focus, clarify expectations for work, give direction to faculty members' efforts, and define the need for faculty development. What is to be measured, how it is to be measured, who is to measure, and the indicators of quality must be carefully considered. The chair must provide that leadership in developing and implementing evaluation of the faculty (Braskamp, Brandenburg, and Ory 1984).

A second and equally powerful opportunity to encourage quality is faculty development—the process of assisting faculty to grow professionally by gaining an understanding of institutional expectations, improving performance in teaching or research, creating a positive work environment, refocusing or redirecting activities, and helping faculty resolve and deal with personal issues. Faculty development is a shared responsibility that can be facilitated through a number of activities and strategies, including orientation sessions, mentoring, intervention in teaching and research, providing models of desired behaviors, considering alternative professional career paths, and assisting faculty in using available resources, such as employee assistance programs.

What Are the Influences of Institutional Type and Discipline on the Chair?

The roles and responsibilities of and expectations for the chair are all influenced by the type of institution and by differences in methodology and body of knowledge of specific academic disciplines. The chair must recognize how institutional type, history, and culture, model of governance, and discipline can influence what is expected of him or her, in turn determining the most effective strategies to use. Chairs should take advantage of opportunities for professional development through programs offered by a number of organizations, institutions, and professional associations.

What Does the Future Hold?

Institutions of higher education face a number of challenges in the remainder of the 1990s and beyond: quality, diversity and gender, recruitment and retention of faculty, funding for professional development, faculty workloads, evaluation, minority students, and ethics. These challenges have no quick fixes, and they can be met and dealt with only through the combined efforts of the entire academic leadership team, including the chief executive, the academic officer, deans, chairs, and faculty. The quality of leadership must be improved at all levels. Chairs should consider human resources, the structure of the organization, and political and symbolic frames of reference in providing leadership to the department. They must pay attention to upgrading leadership skills through mentoring, reading, workshops, self-assessment, and networking. Creating a professional development plan can assist chairs to identify needs, specify objectives, and design techniques for assessment.

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This ERIC digest is based on a new full-length report in the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series, prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education in cooperation with the Association for the Study of Higher Education, and published by the School of Education at the George Washington University. Each report is a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on a single critical issue. Many administrators subscribe to the series and circulate reports to staff and faculty committees with responsibility in a report's topic area. Reports are available through subscriptions for $98.00 per year ($108.00 outside the U.S.). Subscriptions begin with Report 1 and conclude with Report 8 of the current series year. Single copies, at $18.00 each, are available from: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, The George Washington University, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183. Or phone (202) 296-2597.

This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED RR-93-0200. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.